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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000684

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UNPRECEDENTED TRANSPARENCY IN NATIONAL SECURITY TRIAL

REF: MUSCAT 552 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.
Reason: 1.4 (b, d).

Summary

1. (C) Recent arrests of 30-40 Omanis charged with seeking to overthrow the Sultan and impose Ibadhi religious rule under an Imam have been the focus of public and press attention in Oman since January. But the trial itself, underway since April 18, has surprised the public by its unprecedented openness and transparency. Despite restrictions against court attendance by non-Omanis, the print media, parliamentarians, tribal shaykhs and family members have been permitted to witness the proceedings. Extensive reporting on the testimony has revealed that some of the defendants are admitting to the government's charges, while others have denied that their involvement in an Ibadhi organization was either secret or a threat to the government. While a retired top jurist told Emboffs the defendants have adequate counsel, Amnesty International plans to visit Oman in June to assess the entire case. Meanwhile, Omani contacts have expressed concerns that the alleged Ibadhi conspiracy may point to growing sectarian differences among the Omani public, with Ibadhis fearing declining influence and non-Ibadhis decrying Ibadhism's preferential status. End summary.

Unprecedented Press Coverage

2. (SBU) The April 18-20 trial of 31 Omanis in the State Security Court on charges of belonging to an illegal organization and seeking the violent overthrow of the government has taken place in an atmosphere of unprecedented openness and transparency. While proceedings have been open only to Omani citizens, the government has gone beyond the most optimistic expectations in allowing extensive media coverage of each day's events. Moreover, members of both houses of Oman's proto-parliament representing districts in which the suspects resided, relatives, and the defendants' local shaykhs, were likewise invited to observe.

3. (SBU) Press coverage in Oman's Arabic and English dailies have ranged from substantial to meticulous, particularly in the case of English-language Times of Oman. While the names of the accused are being kept out of the formal media to protect their reputations, most have previously been identified in Internet message boards. The charges against each defendant, and their own explanations of how they became involved in a religious organization devoted to the study of Imamate rule under the Ibadhi sect of Islam, was covered in fair detail. Ten defendants testified each of the first two days, and eleven testified on the third day. (Note: There is no word on the status of another ten or so persons believed to be under arrest on similar charges. End note.) While print media coverage has been extensive, the trial has been notably absent from local television news (possibly due to a ban on video cameras in court). Even regional media giant Al Jazeera has neglected to report the trial in its broadcasts, even though the news is carried on its web site.

4. (C) Internet message board Sablat al-Arab (aka al-Sablah) posted information beyond what the papers carried, but characterizations of the testimony were generally consistent with those in the print media. All of the defendants admitted belonging to an organization to propagate awareness in the Ibadhi sect's beliefs at various times since its founding in 1982, but several of them denied that the organization had violent or political designs. Others, however, confessed to intentions of establishing rule by an Ibadhi Imam (as opposed to the current Sultan), of holding meetings in secret, and of storing or trading in weapons. (Note: It is believed that one of those weapons sold was purchased by an Omani religious extremist accused in the shootings of two U.K. citizens, from which the subsequent arrests stemmed. End note.) Some of the defendants charged with weapons possession insisted, however, that the arms were of small caliber, traditional vintage common to many Omani households and were unrelated to their involvement in the Ibadhi organization.

15. (SBU) Al-Sablah claimed that defendants testified the organization was originally legally established by the Grand Mufti, Shaykh Ahmed al-Khalili, and therefore should not be deemed suspicious. Given the fact that two of the Mufti's in-laws and several of his staff are among those arrested, several participants in the Sablah message board asked why the Grand Mufti did not speak out in their defense. One of the accused, a faculty member at Sultan Qaboos University who was charged with running a campus chapter, reportedly testified that there was nothing secret about his activities either, having been granted approval for his organization from the Dean of Student Affairs.

A Fair Process?

16. (C) A former Supreme Court justice now in private practice, Dr. Said al-Busaidi (protect), told Emboffs April 19 that he recused himself from representing any of the defendants because half of the members of the judicial panel in the trial were former students of his. Nevertheless, his brother is one of the defense attorneys, but would not be able to discuss the case with Emboffs until the trial was over. Dr. Said dismissed accusations in the Internet that the defendants lacked adequate legal counsel, but acknowledged that relatively few lawyers in Oman are permitted to practice before the State Security Court, given the requirement that the attorneys be Omani nationals admitted to the Supreme Court bar. Asked whether the defendants had the right of appeal in the event of their conviction, he surmised that the Sultan would be their only recourse. (Note: Although Oman has a Supreme Court, the highest judicial body in the country is the Supreme Judicial Council. The head of that Council, Sayyid Hilal bin Hamad al-Busaidi, is the immediate past president of the Supreme Court, and currently is the President of the State Security Court. At least one current Vice President of the Supreme Court is also among the judicial panel trying this case. Since Sayyid Hilal obviously could not adjudicate an appeal of a case he tried, there effectively is no appellate body available in this instance. Sultan Qaboos is empowered by law to reduce sentences or pardon convicts, but he is not empowered to overturn a conviction itself. End note.)

17. (SBU) Dr. Lamri Chirouf, Middle East Researcher for Amnesty International (AI) in London, informed PolOff on April 19 that AI did not have the resources to send an observer to the trial, but noted they were following the case from London. An AI delegation plans to travel to Oman in June, at which time they hope to interview many of the parties involved. Amnesty had previously issued an urgent appeal calling for the protection from torture of the detainees, and met with the Omani ambassador to London to seek assurances for a fair trial and humane treatment. (Note: While the Internet has contained speculation about mistreatment of some of the detainees, the only specific allegation we have heard is that one of the defendants claimed to have been questioned for 12 hours in a standing position, and that his signed confession contained statements he never made. End note.)

Rising Sectarianism?

18. (C) Given the government's penchant for keeping security matters under close wraps, news of the arrests and trial have captivated the public's attention. While opinions remained mixed on the guilt or innocence of the defendants, the process itself is subject of considerable discussion. As an experienced political observer working for the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council, the lower house of parliament) stated, the government's admission that forces may have sought to overthrow it opens the door to public debate on what government deficiencies led to such an effort.

19. (C) An Ibadhi contact with close professional and family ties to both the Sultan's government and the former Imamate regime (deposed in 1954), recently groused to the DCM about Ibadhi unhappiness with the economic developments in Oman that seem to disproportionately benefit coastal communities. (Note: While Ibadhi Muslims can be found throughout Oman, they are predominately in the interior, whereas as Sunni and Shia tend to reside in the coastal areas. It is not uncommon to this day to hear an Ibadhi refer to the people of the interior as "Omanis" with the clear inference that anyone else is somewhat less truly an Omani. End note.) This contact specifically cited the multi-billion dollar industrial investments taking place in coastal cities such as Sohar and Salalah, and tourism investment that likewise focuses on the coast, as bringing little benefit to Ibadhis. He also voiced resentment over the economic power of Oman's leading commercial families and economic ministers, who are overwhelmingly non-Ibadhi.

10. (C) A Sunni contact likewise faulted the government, but for opposite reasons. He says the Sultan's government accords preferential status to the country's Ibadhi heritage, and that this illegal organization now on trial is a direct and logical outcome of those policies. The Islamic curriculum set by the Ministry of Education, he charges (with some justification), emphasizes Ibadhi practices. Even the diagrams in textbooks teaching young pupils the "proper" way to pray reflect only the Ibadhi method, and auditors from the Ministry routinely visit schools to enforce that narrow course of study, even when the teacher or students may adhere to a different school of Islam. When the Sultan created the modern Shura Council in 1991, he says, the government actively marketed the new institution as being a direct by-product of the Imamate culture. A popular book tracing that political lineage and propagating the value system of Ibadhism as a means of cementing an Omani national identity used to be given as gifts by government officials at every occasion. Those teachings were specifically alluded to by several of the defendants, who claim they were merely supporting the government's own propagation of Ibadhi values. The Sunni contact reasonably asked how the government could be surprised that Ibadhis might have advocated the overthrow of the Sultan's government when dynastic rule is in utter contradiction to 13 centuries of Ibadhi beliefs and practices. (Note: Ibadhism believes in a non-dynastic system of leadership wherein the supreme spiritual leader, called Imam, is elected by consensus by an informal council of senior ulema (religious scholars). End note.)

11. (C) A prominent Sunni businessman personally acquainted with the Sultan's security maven, Minister of the Royal Office General Ali bin Majid al-Ma'amari (reftel), recently voiced to EconOff his fears of rising sectarianism in the Sultanate, which he placed above common concerns over education and employment as his biggest worry for the future of Oman. Noting that one of his siblings is married an Ibadhi and another to a Shia, this businessman faulted the government for its imposing Ibadhi religious practices into the educational curriculum, and for emphasizing it at the College of Sharia and Law (from which most Omani lawyers and judges are graduated). Both he and Dr. Said (above) felt there should be no role for sectarian instruction in Oman's legal curriculum, fearing it was producing "extremists" (in the businessman's estimation) or "Mullahs" (in Dr. Said's parlance). The Sunni claimed that disputes between Sunnis and Shia over a shared mosque in the coastal town of Saham (his hometown and that of General Ali Majid) grew so heated that Ali Majid ordered the structure razed to end further arguments. (Note: An Ibadhi FSN accompanying EconOff in the meeting disagreed with the Sunni's assessment that Ibadhism is given preference in Oman's educational and judicial systems. End note.)

Comment

12. (C) The trial is set to enter its terminal stage on April 25 when defense attorneys will present summations of their pleadings, after which the judicial panel will retire to render its decision. Whatever the outcome, this process will long be remembered for its extraordinary openness, particularly as it followed months of rampant rumor-mongering in the press and Internet but scant details from the government. Stung by the initial overblown wire reports that hundreds of Omanis planning violent acts were arrested, which put a serious cramp in Oman's cultivated image as a land of tolerance, it remains to be seen if the government's recourse to transparency is but a short-term tactic.
BALTIMORE